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AUTHOR	Nurss, Joanne R.
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ABSTRACT

A consideration of readiness for kindergarten must take into account the kindergarten program and the teacher's expectations of the child. This digest first examines kindergarten teachers' expectations for children's social, behavioral, sensory-motor, cognitive, and language abilities upon entrance to kindergarten. The issue of kindergarten entrance age is then addressed, and different types of kindergarten programs are discussed. The inappropriateness of academically oriented programs for young children which stress structured, whole group, and paper-and-pencil activities is pointed out. It is emphasized that a child might be ready for one type of instructional program, but not another. (PCB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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Readiness for Kindergarten

Joanne R. Nurss

What social, language, perceptual, and motor skills do 5–year–olds need to be ready for kindergarten? What effect does the kindergarten curriculum have on a child's readiness? Is chronological age a factor? What is expected by the end of kindergarten?

Introduction

Readiness is a term used to describe preparation for what comes next: readiness for kindergarten involves both the child and the instructional situation. Any consideration of the preparation a child needs to be successful in kindergarten must take into account the kindergarten program and the teacher's expectations of the child.

Social and Behavioral Expectations

Kindergarten teachers expect that children will be able to function within a cooperative learning environment in which the child works both independently and in small and large groups. Children are expected to be able to attend to and finish a task, listen to a story in a group, follow two or three oral directions, take turns and share, and care for their belongings. They are also expected to follow rules, respect the property of others, and work within the time and space constraints of the school program. It is important that children learn to distinguish between work and play, knowing when and where each is appropriate within the definition of each (Bradley, 1984; LeCompte, 1980).

Sensory-Motor Expectations

Teachers expect children to develop certain physical skills before they enter kindergarten. Children are expected to have mastered many large muscle skills, such as walking, running, and climbing, and fine motor skills requiring eye–hand coordination, such as use of a pencil, crayons, or scissors. Fine motor skills are used when the child begins to write its name and to make attempts at written expression. It is assumed that children have acquired both visual and auditory discrimination of objects and sounds. Such discrimination skills will be used to learn the names and sounds of letters and the names and quantities of numerals. Children are expected to have developed the concepts of same and different, so that they can sort objects into groups whose members are alike in some way. Usually the kindergarten teacher expects the children to recognize and name colors, shapes, sizes, and their own names (even though these concepts are often part of the curriculum early in the school year).

Cognitive and Language Expectations

Most five–year–olds can express themselves fluently with a variety of words and can understand an even larger variety of words used in conversations and stories. If children have been exposed to books and heard stories read and told, they have begun to develop an interest in what print says and how it is used to express ideas; a concept of story and story structure; and an understanding of the relationship between oral and written language.

Chronological Age

Many school systems and states have raised the entrance age for kindergarten in hopes that the older age of the class will increase the likelihood of the children's success. However, research does not support this action. Most studies show that chronological age alone is not a factor in kindergarten success (Meisels, 1987; Wood, 1984).

Kindergarten Curriculum

Many children now have a prior group experience in nursery school, prekindergarten, or day care. In the past, when kindergarten was the child's initial school experience, its focus was on the child's social adjustment to school. Kindergarten was usually a half–day program whose curriculum and activities were separate from the rest of the school, and whose purpose was to prepare the child for first grade. Now kindergarten is an integral part of the elementary school's curriculum, and the focus has shifted from social to cognitive or academic (Nurss and Hodges, 1982). Many states fund full–day kindergarten programs on the assumption that 5–year–olds can benefit from a longer school experience. Kindergartners vary in the degree to which their

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cognitive skills are strengthened through a developmentally oriented program with language–based, concrete activities. In many kindergartens, language, cognitive, sensory–motor, and social–emotional skills are addressed through play. Small group instruction, learning centers, and whole group language activities are used as systematic, planned opportunities for children to develop in all areas.

In some cases, however, the kindergarten uses structured, whole group, paper–and–pencil activities oriented to academic subjects, such as reading and mathematics. The curriculum in these kindergartens often constitutes a downward extension of the primary grade curriculum and may call for the use of workbooks which are part of a primary level textbook series. Many early childhood professionals have spoken out on the inappropriateness of such a curriculum and have urged widespread adoption of a developmentally appropriate curriculum (Bredekamp, 1986).

The question of readiness for kindergarten depends in part on which type of program the child enters. Different approaches to reading and writing, for example, make different demands on a young child. A child may be ready for one type of instructional program, but not another.

A further issue is that of the expectations of the teachers and school system for what the child will accomplish by the end of kindergarten. As expectations become more academic and assessments more formal (for example, standardized tests that compare children to a national sample of kindergarten children) pressure increases to retain children who do not meet expectations or to place them in a transition class between kindergarten and first grade. The assumption is that children who have not achieved a minimum level of cognitive and academic skills prior to first grade will benefit from another year of kindergarten. While that may be true for some, it is not true for many others (Shepard, 1987). Developmentally appropriate programs assume that children vary upon entrance; that all children progress during the program at their own rate and in their own manner; and that children will continue to vary at the end of the program.

Conclusion

Readiness for kindergarten depends on a child's development of social, perceptual, motor, and language skills expected by the teacher. It also depends on the curriculum's degree of structure, the behavior required by the instructional program, and expectations of what is to be achieved by the end of the program.

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